

SEVENTH EPISODE.

The Tormentors.

CHAPTER I.

IHIS Widow O'Keefe stepped quickly and snatched some thing from the floor while other strangers peered into every alcove and nook and corner of the two-roomed bath which comprised the Widow O'Keefe's top door suit. The object was a small snapshot of June.

The deserted husband of pretty June Warner was at the hall door with his hand reached out for the knob, and in another instant Ned Warner and June would have been face to face! In that instant the Widow O'Keefe whipped the snapshot under her apron and the very swiftness of the motion struck into the corner of Ned Warner's resolute eyes. He turned, and he and the father of June glanced at each other. There was something suspicious in the look and warped and withered Widow O'Keefe and her tall slip of a son. Ned came abruptly from the door and resumed his search. At that very moment June, just outside, had paused on the third step from the bottom to rest the bow upon her shiny little slipper and to give it a vigorous pat to make it behave and stay in place.

Six young Sammy O'Keefe walked to the window, whistling, and glanced out with an air of great indifference. On the other side of the street stood Officer Toolie, and his eyes roved anxiously from window to window of the narrow, dingy slice of a house which was the Widow O'Keefe's. At sight of Sammy Officer Toolie pointed energetically toward the door. He waved both arms and pointed toward the doorway.

Sammy then slipped quietly out of the room. June: The Butless Sammy used the next quickest method to wireless. With one noiseless spring he straddled the banister rail, whisked around the curve and down to June, who was halfway up the stairs, jumped off with a footstep as light as a feather, grabbed the astounded girl by the wrist and dragged her down the steps at the risk of both their necks. Sammy shoved June into the second floor hall closet. Sammy locked the door and stuck the key in his pocket and set the springs to his thin legs to work and was sitting laxly on the top step, bared and whistling softly, when Ned Warner and Mr. and Mrs. John Moore and Bounce and Iris Blodgett came out. Bubby extremely dejected and tried explaining vaguely that it was all a mistake. June couldn't possibly have been here. But she must have been, after all, because— Still, how could it be?

June in the dark closet, shut off from all light and sound, stood bewildered, her eyes distended in the darkness, while Ned stood not two feet away from her. He had paused before that very door, as if some delicate magnetism had caught and held him there. No trace of her beauty; no trace of Marie, the French Canadian maid with the high cheek bones; no trace of the mysterious black Vandycreek man, whom none of them had cared to mention to the Widow O'Keefe. Gilbert Blye! Ned clenched his fists, and his brow grew blue as his mind filled with the image of that dark, handsome face with its glowing eyes and suave smile. That image had never been absent from Ned's mind since the disappearance of his beautiful bride, a thousand times that succession of incidents had flashed upon his memory with vivid distinctness—June asleep in the Pullman during the long night train, and his train pulling alongside them in the approach to the Grand Central station; the sight through the windows of the parallel cars, of that same stranger bending over June with his infernal smile, and her smiling up at him; Blye following June's trail in another from the station, and Ned's fruitless pursuit in a third taxi; the chase out to Baysport that same night, when June had stolen her clothes and Marie, the return case, where Ned had seen June and Marie step into Blye's luxurious limousine and whisk away with blit! Everywhere that Ned had found a trace of June he had found a trace of Gilbert Blye, and he wished to live for one thing—to meet Blye face to face and with his bare hands strangle that scoundrel to death!

Ned became aware of the Widow O'Keefe tying him from midway of the stairs. She was a frail looking old woman, with her gnarled hands clasped before her, but her heady little eyes were as sharp as the unexpected stars from dull jewels, and there was not one move of Ned's party which escaped her. Sammy still whistling with exuberance, was so persistently not gazing at the closet door that it was a wonder no one asked for the key.

"We're wasting our time," finally said Iris Blodgett. "We're probably letting them get away." And June's friend took her husband with her. The rest of the party followed. Meanwhile Marie, disguised in the suffocatingly tight black mourning suit of the Widow O'Keefe, was many blocks out of the danger zone, smothering in a telephone booth and calling up the place where June had come to work. Mrs. Villard was not in her beautiful home up the Hillside, nor was Miss June there. They had gone into the city, but the maid gave Marie a telephone number. Mrs. Villard answered that call from a gorgeously furnished room where half a dozen stunningly powdered young women sat smoking,

and her beauty was glorified immediate concern when she learned that June had not come home to the Widow O'Keefe's.

"Why?" she naturally wanted to know.

"Well, you're a friend of hers, aren't you?" inquired Marie.

"Of course," smiled Mrs. Villard, and before her came the fresh young face of pretty June.

"Well, then, I'll tell you!" Marie threw her thick black veil over her shoulder for the twentieth time, and a drop of perspiration trickled down her nose. "I'm her maid Marie, and she hasn't come home."

"But she's already started," worried Mrs. Villard. "She's probably there by this time. Why mustn't she come home?"

"Hush!" And the voice of Marie cracked. "Oh! Goodby! How am I to get her away from there?"

"Wait a minute!" This seemed to be no time for asking questions. "I'll come down in my car."

"Oh, you do," marveled Marie, nearly pulling the telephone off the wall.

"Wait a minute! Wait, Marie! Where am I to come?"

"Oh, you?" And Marie gulped. "It's the Widow O'Keefe's, at the corner of DeShay street and Duck after, right

in front of Officer Toolie's post. Officer Toolie's post when there came suddenly toward her a family emanation which she remembered with a jump in her breast.

Suddenly there was a loud roar of Joe from a handsome colt sitting beside the driver, and Bounce, who never left his seat when in the city, was halfway to the car in less space than a minute. Marie hurried for the nearest chair, Bounce looking happily at her back.

Joe roared and yelled for June to stop, but it was unnecessary. That good-humored but good body brakes and the Moors, the Blodgetts and Ned Warner all tried to crowd out of the road. While the astirred Bubbs checked the doorway, Ned rushed after Marie, but he suddenly found himself impelled to retreat to Bounce's side.

"Excuse me," said Officer Toolie, breaking him. "Was if you or the others to the east?"

"I want to speak to that young woman!" And Ned tried to pass around Officer Toolie as fast as possible, accompanied by the hallooing Bubbs, crowded swiftly into a corner along the fire-drill as far as a red and white striped rug.

Officer Toolie was of this instant one of the most awkward men on the fire-drill. He had tried to shove aside Ned, and now they met again in one another's way for a moment.

"At Phoebe's. Then, you think, to Baysport?" said Ned. "I'll be at Mrs. Villard's and we'll be in the car driving away. Give the fat man a quick look and wave your hand to him."

"Give me your coat," said Ned.

"What you ordinate?" retorted Officer Toolie.

"Some work a servant of mine," said Ned.

"Well, your husband's going to have to pull his coat and give the girls."

"Just where Phoebe's?" enquired Ned.

"No."

"Then it's none of my business. And Officer Toolie looked toward the other with a twinkle dancing in his eye. Marie knew every turn and twist within ten miles of the Corridor. "We can go to the lady."

They went down to the step, and looked in. There was a sudden sense of crushed twigs and no Marie visible.

"Where is she?" asked Jerry.

"The Widow O'Keefe?" declared Ned.

MARIE dashed into the O'Keefe home as fast as her red and white striped legs would carry her. Fast as she ran, however, she had no sooner started to open the door than she burst out of her grasp and was across the hall and up on the bed and tumbling all over June, hollering in her ear.

"Bounce!" scolded June. "Bounce!"

"Will you be all right?" screamed Marie to the dog. "Miss June, dear, get up

and get dressed. You'll be all right."

The coat was still close when a few minutes later, Mrs. Villard and June and Marie and Bounce and a huge bundle of clothes came out of the passage between the O'Keefe and Mr. Peterson houses and climbed into the car.

In front of one of the tallest of those mighty towers which commerce has reared as monuments to her ingenuity was Mrs. Villard led June through portions of a majesty which would have graced a cathedral in older days. June lost in the beauty of this entrance did not notice a peculiar circumstance. Mrs. Villard had dismissed her car, sending Bounce and Bounce home with the chauffeur.

"Don't you mind, darlin'," encouraged the widow heartily. "They got nuff out of either Sammy or me. Sammy, I'm proud of you too. I didn't know you could be so good and I'll never believe anything you tell me again. And there was a couple of your friends—sheer—heavy soul or a young woman that never left talkin' or laughin' or cryin' or somethin' one minute after the other and her husband, a bearded little fellow that'll be no trouble until he gets walked on some day, then watch out for his kind. My Doo was that way. I could hardly tell that poor old Doo night and day till I see the oldie begin to come in his eye—Why, darlin', what's the matter? Sammy, you big simpleton, why don't you get Miss June a glass of water? And be quick, will you?"

Jabbering out all her pent-up excitement, not a word of which June had heard, she helped the wobbly, half-faltering girl up to her own room and mothered around her with a solicitude which was fully as lively as her tongue and far more sincere.

June might as well have been alone for all that she was conscious of the O'Keefe misadventures. They had been here, here in these very rooms, Ned,

her father and mother! How the long all for that! How she wished they had found her! And a great load of love engulfed us in her. She must give up this foolish flight for a romantic ideal and be just a girl and return to her own people, and be patient and forgiving and be accepted as Spud's strong arms, never to leave them again! She rose with a will impulsive to hurry straight after them. But her knees bent under her. She had not known how much this sudden emotion had taken away her strength. The Widow O'Keefe pressed her slender hand in her hair, and gently held a glass of water to her lips. She sipped it slowly, then took from the table and took off her little shoes and drew the stockings over her feet, because, to say the least, and the Widow O'Keefe wiped her eyes with tawny knuckles as she closed the door.

As just the disengaged party left the house of O'Keefe.

In the meantime Ned Villard had stopped in front of Gilbert Blye's room.

A short while, far away, leaning against the lamp-post smoking a short cigar when Mrs. Villard's chauffeur passed down and saw that she had a cold appearance of that being the young person she was.

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